

## BOOK REVIEW

# “A GUERRA CIVIL EM ANGOLA, 1975-2002”

By Justin Pearce<sup>1</sup>

Gilson Lázaro<sup>2</sup>

*A guerra civil em Angola, 1975-2002*, as was the book published on April 2017 in Portugal by the South-African journalist and researcher Justin Pearce, whose original edition in English presents a diametrically opposed title – *Political identity and conflict in Central Angola, 1975-2002* with double edition in United States of America and in South Africa by the Cambridge University Press. The translation published two years later is interesting to the Portuguese-speaking reader and makes for a pleasant read. The book cover is ostensive, featuring a vibrant red that seeks to antagonize the black rooster symbol of UNITA and the black and yellow star symbol of MPLA. In this edition, differing from the original, the black and yellow star overlaps the black rooster. Its purpose has not gone unnoticed, because the book cover and the gesture of overlapping the political symbols of the two rival movements, besides the colors and title, seems to clash with the content.

The book is the result of some dozens interviews of the author in the Central Plateau of Angola region, with its notably unpretentious original edition featuring on the cover the photography of a former fighter of UNITA in an ex-military area situated in the Bié province, whilst the back cover brings comments of reputable academics of Angola topics<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Pearce, Justin. 2017. *A guerra civil em Angola, 1975-2002*. Lisboa: Tinta-da-china, p.295.

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<sup>3</sup> In English, *The Civil War in Angola, 1975-2002*.

<sup>4</sup> The historians (Linda Heywood and Jean-Michael Mabeko-Tali), the political scientists (Gerald Bender and Ricardo Soares de Oliveira) and the anthropologist (Antônio Tomás).

In the Portuguese edition the choice to alter the book title to *A guerra civil em Angola, 1975-2002*, not being this the central focus of the study has the whimsy of misleading the less attentive reader. In a book divided in nine chapters, Justin Pearce dives into the conflict history to question the identities and the political support of the various Angolan social segments to the two warring movements, namely the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA<sup>5</sup>) and People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA<sup>6</sup>). The symmetry established by the author when analyzing the two rival movements throughout the armed conflict, with a focus on the Central Plateau, seems somewhat forced.

Differing from Rafael Marques, the preface author, who was unrestrained in his exaggerated enthusiasm, the author is careful in regards to the temptation of uttering categorical affirmations on the history of the Angolan conflict and its internal and external dynamics. There is not a single mention of the consequences of the heavy colonial inheritance on that which concerns the identity cleavages and constructs.

A first exaggerated commentary from his preface writer is the excerpt where he tries to suggest the pioneering of Justin Pearce on the study of this topic. Such is the importance of the mistake that it is worth highlighting, in first place, the book *The normality of civil war: armed groups and everyday life in Angola*, by Teresa Koloma Beck and the collection *Dynamics of Social Reconstruction in post-war Angola*, Arnold Bergstraesser Institut, 2016. The second mention is of a methodological order, because previously Teresa Beck had held with former combatants of UNITA, shortly after 2002, an investigation on something she designated as *the social engineering project* created by this political-military Angolan organization. The third mention that Marques make about the author's primacy, manifested by the attention granted to the narratives of common citizens, is another half-truth, because when it proved necessary Justin Pearce resorted to UNITA notables to confirm or deny a given situation or information. The division between the pros and cons that the author makes about the interventions of his informants can confirm this perception.

The preface tone reveals that its author is not familiarized with the debate about the Angolan conflict. Such an unrestrained enthusiasm can also be verified on the comment by Ricardo Oliveira on the flap of the book. Being this the only comment of the original maintained in the Portuguese edition, it seems excessive.

<sup>5</sup> Portuguese acronym, *União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola*.

<sup>6</sup> Portuguese acronym, *Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*.

Actually, Justin Pearce seems to deepen his interest on the identity nuances already linked to UNITA in his first book “*An outbreak of Peace: Angola’s situation of confusion*”. In an article co-written with Didier Peclard, though, entitled “*L’UNITA à la recherche de ‘son peuple’* [The UNITA searching for its people], they work the emic notion of “UNITA people” to explain the strategy woven by the movement founded by Jonas Savimbi to mobilize and articulate the populations that accompanied them, although this seems problematic to us when it is used to explain the identity confluence of a region as complex as is the Central Plateau. This is stressed by the first interview, opening the book, when his anonymous interlocutor, bluntly responds that: “I have been a member of UNITA, but I am now a member of the government” (Pearce 2017, 23). The ambiguity of this answer carries a holistic interest. Under a certain sense people mix up political identity with ethnic and regional policy.

An aspect that seems crucial to us in Pierce’s book is that, in the first pages, the author works with the notion of *rebels* applied to UNITA, to further on use it to refer to both UNITA and its rival MPLA, “the conflict politics became a constitutive element of different and incompatible versions of the Angolan nation” (Pearce 2017, 39). It seems to us to be problematic the use of the terminology *rebels*, in regards to UNITA.

In chapter one, the author portrays the antecedents of the independence, the beginning of the armed conflict and a tension between the mutually exclusive Portuguese and Angolan narratives can be clearly noted, and therefore a certain uneasiness of the author is perceived. Examples are the excerpts in which Justin Pearce cleverly avoids an analysis of the drama of the anticolonial war, which opposed the Portuguese armed forces to the national liberation movements, for he fell for the *paternalist discourse* of the time, verifiable in the utilization of the cliché of the badly managed *decolonization a la Portuguese* without granting it a critical exam. The author seems to accept the half-truths that can be found in a certain Portuguese historiographical literature. And in this in particular he uses the term *Portuguese revolution* (Pearce 2017, 44) or, before that, *the Portuguese departure* (Pearce 2017, 37) in an euphemistic tone.

More relevant than this is the acceptance of the discourse that subordinates the independence of Angola to the April 25<sup>th</sup> of 1974. The criticism made to the hegemonic Cold War narrative imposes itself, in our understanding and in an extensive form, to the myths surrounding the April 25<sup>th</sup> of 1974, because the independence of Angola, Guinea Bissau and Mozambique were obtained through much bloodshed on all cases. If it is true that the contribution of the events of colonial Portugal is recognized (especially the April 25<sup>th</sup> of 1974) to the course of history in the former colonies, the inverse is also true, although,

ultimately, the April 25<sup>th</sup> is more a result of the pressure of the military theater in the former colonies than the contrary.

The chapters III and IV are dense, but the limitation demonstrated in the use of the notion of state constrains the analysis, because the confinement to which the author relegates the *UNITA State* and the *MPLA State*, to the geographical margins of the cities in the Central Plateau, is problematic. In an interpretation opposed to that of the author, we understand that UNITA did not work with a territory-based notion of State. Unlike the MPLA-controlled conventional state that sought to maintain the colonial boundaries, UNITA moved from the idea of an *imagined community*, in the words of Benedict Anderson (2009), that could work both in the cities, on rural zones – said liberated – and in the woods. The Jamba, as a community imagined by UNITA and its last stronghold or *community of suffering* (Ferrão, 2016) – a quasi-state – is an example of this. On the other hand, the problematic of racial identities in the late 1950s and early 1960s colonial context, that enabled the foundation of UNITA and MPLA, didn't receive any mention. Justin Pearce skirts this question and attempts to homogenize the Plateau picking as focus the educated black class and the rural populations that accompanied them.

In chapter III it was interesting to observe the form in which Pearce discusses the demystification of UNITA's *long march*, although he seems sensitive to the discursive performance of this organization regarding the fact it is self-defined as a defender of the peasantry's interests. Throughout the chapter the author perceives the ambiguities of the UNITA discourse, presenting dual justifications to mobilization of the instructed classes (pastors, priests, nurses, professors, administrative technicians, and mission's students) of the plateau's cities and villages, when at the same time it claimed to be the trustee of the rural-based militancy. In this in particular we understand that the notion of peasantry did not deserve from the author a discussion for the reality would not grant it plausibility. The two chapters referred above reinforce in the level of the analysis the bipolarity of the Angolan conflict, but it becomes equally evident the fragility of this scheme as an analytical category when it tries to avoid the traps of the *political identities*, unstable according to the circumstances in the course of the civil war. In the scheme elaborated in the book it is difficult to escape the identitary-political confinement associated to the two liberation movements, as people that lived in the zones under control of both movements had no other options to choose from. Such premise does not escape and seems to us quite coherent with the ethnical classification of the Angolan nationalism produced by the North-American historian John Marcum (1969), that long time ago paved all the historical-political interpretation of contemporary nationalism and has since been a straightjacket for researchers of Angola topics. Despite the author's

justifications, an arbitrary presentation of the interviewees' profiles is noted, not being perceived the choices that based the omission, the replacement for fictitious names and the revelation, in other cases, of the real names. Because of this, the affirmation presented in the preface (Pearce 2017, 9) is in a collision route with the content, because the author differs from his preface writer when we take into account the choice made by him in chapter V, which portrays the trajectory of UNITA in the Central Plateau between the years of 1976 and 1991. The accounts of the interviewees are themselves an individual form of recollection, of dealing with the memories of what happened in the past and that which is chosen to be remembered. The memories aren't free of manipulations, voluntary or not. In fact, the act of remembering certain episodes and not others, more traumatic ones, is in itself an exercise of choice. The recurrent use of the verbs *to remind*, *to remember* and *to reminisce* catches the eye, when facts reported by the respondents are presented, as well as a hierarchical position between the interviewees. The bonds of kinship beyond the geographical locus of the interviewees, as well as their areas of belonging and residence don't seem to have deserved the author's attention when analyzing the identities.

When studying the ideological question, Justin Pearce seems to have neglected this important identity marker in a context of war where the identity borders are blurred. The line that separates a military from a civilian is precarious. A certain imprecision in the use of the notions of *farmer* and *peasant* is also noted. An adequate concept treatment would assist in orienting the reader to the meaning that the author intended to transmit. In chapter VI, the author concentrates in the accounts of his interlocutors to describe the UNITA stronghold located in southeast Angola, a *quasi-state*, mixing in many an occasion propaganda and reality. The lack of alternative sources of information that would allow to the presentation of a more factual Jamba image constrains the analysis.

In chapters VII and XVIII the analyses focus in the 1990s to explain the operation of UNITA and MPLA in the Central Plateau so-called *cities*. In fact, the cities to which the author refers are the administrative centers of Huambo, Cuíto and Bailundo and little more. The war effectively happened in the spaces between the *vila* – usually the administrative and urban center and the surrounding villages, where the borders that separate the urban from the rural or from the *wood* zones are fragile and vary greatly, depending on the local perceptions.

Chapter IX ends the discussion on the final dynamics in some of the epic moments that the war created. It narrates, however, the forms of military recuperation of the national territory carried out by the national army, UNITA's fragilities and loss of military strength, and the death of its founder, as well as the initiatives assumed by military entities that culminated with the signing of the Luena memorandum, marginalizing the civilian actors. In the last chapter Justin

Pierce does not only appreciate the initiatives of religious (COIEPA, Jubileu 2000, Pro-Peace, CICA and others) and civic (Civic Association of Angola and others) organizations, but also draws little consequence from his empirical corpus when analyzing the national reconciliation, relying more on his own impressions about those days' political context than in the accounts of his interviewees.

Despite what was stated above, Justin Pearce's book has the merit of provoking a debate on political and other identities in the context of war both inside and outside Angola.

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